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COMMENTARY
Forced Labour

After a few years of relative respite, the forcible use of unpaid civilian porters by the Burmese junta's troops in Shan State appears to have become more frequent during the early and mid 2008.

Forced portering, one of the most notorious types of forced labour imposed on the people by the troops of successive Burmese military juntas since they came to Shan State in 1950s, has somewhat reduced around mid 2000s due to pressure from the ILO and the international community.

However, it has never completely stopped. Although in military operations during which many porters were required, the junta's troops turned to using prisoners, brought in from all parts of the country, the SPDC troops in Shan State still routinely and systematically used local villagers as guides and porters in their activities such as regular patrols of local areas, etc., albeit in much smaller numbers.

Noticeably since around the end of last year, 2007, incidents in which greater numbers of people were randomly conscripted to serve as unpaid porters have again become frequent occurrences. The demeanour of the troops also appeared to have become harsher; even women and the sick were not spared.

In conclusion, forced labour is still widely used in its various forms by the SPDC troops in Shan State, and they also often enjoy extorting money and possessions from the people as they requisition their free labour.

SITUATION OF FORCED PORTERING IN SHAN STATE

Forced portering, one of the most feared types of forced labour imposed on the people by the successive Burmese juntas' troops in Shan State, that had somewhat reduced during the previous few years, appears to have become more frequent in 2008.

Apart from the systematic and regular duty to provide 2-3 persons on standby at military camps and bases to serve as guides and porters, the incidents in which people were randomly seized and forced to serve as unpaid porters for days have become somewhat common again.

In some cases, even women and the sick were not spared. The following 3 incidents are such instances that took place during early and mid 2008:

WOMEN FORCED TO SERVE AS UNPAID PORTERS IN MURNG-PAN

In June 2008, 5 women who were working at a farm were forcibly conscripted by SPDC troops from LIB332 to serve as unpaid porters for 3 days, in Nawng Lom village tract in **Murng-Pan** township.

On 2 June 2008, 5 farming couples were working at a farm near an old village, Pung Zaan (relocated), in Nawng Lom village tract in Murng-Pan township when

they saw a group of SPDC troops at a distance coming towards them.

The farmers were originally from Pung Zaan and nearby villages in Nawng Lom village tract, who had moved to Murng-Pan town a few years ago, and had now come back to work their farm near their old village on a daily basis. When they saw the SPDC troops coming towards them, the women told their husbands to run away and hide in the forest, hoping the troops would not take women as porters.

The SPDC troops, about 30 of them, were from Murng-Pan-based LIB332 who were going to patrol Nawng Lom village tract and were looking for porters. However, as they found no men at the farm, they forced the said 5 women to go with them and serve as porters.

The women had to carry pots and pans and other food stuff and go with the military patrol as they searched the jungles where they thought Shan soldiers could be hiding. But there were no signs of Shan soldiers even after searching for 3 whole days.

The women were then released at a deserted old village in the area where they had their farm after serving as unpaid porters for 3 days during which they were fed inadequately and had no proper rest nor a chance to wash themselves.

Even though the women had with them the pass issued by the SPDC authorities in Murng-Pan, permitting them to go and work at their farm, they were not safe from the roaming SPDC troops. People in Murng-Pan were required to obtain a pass on a daily basis from the authorities to go and work outside the town. They had to pay for the pass and had to hang it on their necks while working and going around outside the town.

Among the 5 women, Naang Zaw and Naang Nguay, aged 38, were originally from Pung Zaan village, and the 3 other women were from some other villages nearby. All the villages were deserted at the time of this report.

FORCED PORTERAGE PRECEDING CONSTITUTIONAL REFERENDUM IN KAE-SEE

In early May 2008, 12 villagers who were working at a farm in Ho Nawng village tract, **Kae-See** township, were forced to serve as unpaid porters for 4 days by a patrol of SPDC troops from LIB541 based in Murng-Kerng township.

On the morning of 1 May 2008, a patrol of about 40 SPDC troops from LIB541, stationed at Ham Ngaai village in Murng-Kerng township, came to Maak Mer village in Ho Nawng village tract in Kae-See township.

The SPDC troops saw 12 men of Maak Mer village working at a farm near their village and forcibly conscripted them to serve as unpaid porters, saying they needed the help of the people to go to surrounding villages and collect names of people who would be eligible to vote in the approaching Constitutional Referendum.

The villagers were required to carry various things, eg ammunition, food stuff and clothes, etc.. Some 3 of them had to carry 60 mm mortar shells, 6 rounds each, 3 on each side of their shoulder poles. The others had to carry rice and other food stuff, and clothes, and some soldiers even hung their boots on the shoulder poles of the porters.

After patrolling through several villages, including Maak Mer, Ho Nawng and Khaai Ton, for 4 days, the villagers were released. In-Da, aged 44, De-Win, aged 29, Zaai Oo, aged 34, Lung Aw, aged 50 and Kaw-Na, aged 45, were among the said villagers; the names of the other villagers were not available.

The villagers said that during the last dry season, from March to June 2008, people in Ho Nawng village tract, Kae-See township, were also forced by the SPDC troops stationed at Ham Ngaai in Murng-Kerng township to provide water for their camp on a daily basis, for drinking and washing.

Every day, 3 bullock cart-loads of water was required to be transported to their camp without fail. To fulfill this forced labour duty, cart owners had to take turns and work in a rotating system, and those who failed to show up for their turns were fined, 3,000 kyat per time per cart.

FORCED PORTERAGE, CAUSING DEATH LATER, IN HO-PONG

For more than one week during April 2008, more than 20 villagers of Nawng Wawn village in **Ho-Pong** township were seized and forced to serve as unpaid porters by a column of SPDC troops from different military units.

On 7 April 2008, early in the morning, a column of about 70 SPDC troops, comprising troops from different units, came into Nawng Wawn village in Ho-Pong township and randomly seized more than 20 men to be used as unpaid porters.

The SPDC troops said that they were going to fight a Pa-O armed group who were still refusing to capitulate to them and needed some people to help carry their things, and forced the villagers to carry their ammunition, rice, cooking oil and other food stuff and go along with the column.

Mu-Lin, aged 40, one of the porters, was suffering from an illness when he was seized by the SPDC troops. Although he tried to plead with them, saying he had a terrible fever, the troops did not listen, but forced him to carry a sack of yellow bean, weighing not less than 13 kg.

For more than one week the villagers had to carry their heavy loads and walk with the military column as the troops searched the areas south of their village, and Mu-Lin was completely wiped out by the time they were released.

A few days after Mu-Lin got home and was resting to recuperate, there was news that one of the Pa-O armed groups would forcibly take new recruits in the area. Fearing that he might be recruited even before getting well, Mu-Lin took his wife and their child and fled.

As Mu-Lin and his family headed for the Thai border via Murng-Pan and Murng-Ton he fell ill again on the way, apparently because of the exhaustion from which he had not yet recovered, and died at Naa Kawng Mu village in Murng-Ton township. He was survived by his wife and a child who later managed to get to the Thai border.

FORCED LABOUR, EXTORTION, RELATED TO STATE INFRASTRUCTURE

Unpaid civilian forced labour is still being used in building and maintaining State infrastructure by the military authorities. Although cases of new construction were somewhat occasional, maintaining them have been mostly routine and constant.

In requisitioning forced labour, the authorities also often used threats and other tactics to extort money and/or other possessions from the people. The following are some such instances:

MASS FORCED LABOUR AND EXTORTION IN BUILDING FENCES FOR MILITARY AIRFIELD, IN NAM-ZARNG

For several months, from March up to at least July 2008 when this report was received, people in **Nam-Zarng** township were forced by the SPDC authorities to build fences at an airfield, used mainly for military purposes, in Nam-Zarng township.

In early March 2008, SPDC authorities of IB66 issued an order requiring several village tracts that were situated around Nam-Zarng town to cut bamboo and transport them to the base of IB66, to be used in building fences at the said airfield.

Villagers had to take turns and work in rotation to cut bamboo and those who had mini-tractors had to provide their vehicles to be used in transporting bamboo as well as workers. The fuel for the tractors was bought with the money equally extorted from all the villagers.

According to the villagers of Nam Wo and Kun Saai villages in Wan Hai village tract, each person from each family from their villages had to go to work 4 times per month and provide 2,500 kyat of money each time for the costs of tractors' fuel. Those who failed to go to work were additionally fined, 2,000 kyat per time per person, apart from the fuel cost.

The SPDC troops themselves and Nam-Zarng townspeople were required to build the fences on the eastern and southern sides of the airfield which were about 7-8 miles in combined length. Troops in military fatigues and the townspeople were seen working together in apparently equal numbers on a more or less daily basis.

The fences were to be 2 layers of bamboo picket fences and one layer of barbed wire fences. The bamboo fences were completed sometime in June 2008, and in July when this report was received, the barbed wire fences were still under construction.

FORCED LABOUR AND EXTORTION IN CLEARING DRAINAGE DITCHES IN KAENG-TUNG

In late June 2008, people in No. 3 quarter of **Kaeng-Tung** town who lived around the lake in the centre of the town were forced by the SPDC authorities to clear the drainage ditches in front of their houses and hire municipal trucks to take the debris and detritus away out of the town.

On 21 June 2008, community leaders of No. 3 quarter of Kaeng-Tung were summoned by the authorities to the SPDC township office and were told to make the people in their quarter who lived near the lake clear the drainage ditches that ran in front of their houses of the debris and detritus that had accumulated in the ditches.

When the community leaders asked why they did not let the town municipal workers do the work since it was normally their duty, the authorities said that they were quite busy and had many other things to do and again told the community leaders to do as ordered.

When the people had cleared the drainage ditches of the debris and detritus and piled them up in front of their houses, the authorities then again ordered them to clear them away by hiring municipal trucks to carry them out of the town at the rate of 1,500 kyat per truckload.

Some townspeople were heard complaining that they had been dutifully paying various kinds of taxes as demanded by the authorities, including taxes for the municipality, but they were still often required to do things that were supposed to have been done with taxpayers' money.

FORCED LABOUR, EXTORTION, RELATED TO AGRICULTURE

Unpaid forced labour of the rural communities is still systematically and routinely used by the military authorities in cultivating yearly seasonal crops and other long-term crops such as physic nut plantations, etc..

In addition to the regular types of forced labour, other types of random and occasional forced labour was also used by the authorities, e.g., in growing trees to beautify the roads, etc..

PEOPLE FORCED TO PLANT PINE TREES ALONG ROADSIDES IN MURNG-KERNG

For several months in early and mid 2008, people in **Murng-Kerng** township were forced to plant pine trees on the sides of the main roads leading to Kae-See and Lai-Kha township, by the SPDC military authorities of LIB514 based in Murng-Kerng.

In early 2008, villagers of the villages situated along the main roads, leading to Kae-See township to the north and to Lai-Kha township to the south, in Murng-Kerng township, were forced to clear the sides of the main roads of all trees, big and small, in areas within 50 yards from the roads.

Then in mid 2008, starting from around the end of May, the authorities ordered the villagers to plant pine trees along the sides of the main roads within the areas that had been cleared of other trees. The villagers were required to find the pine seedlings on their own.

Each village was allotted an area of land to plant and had to take responsibility to look after the pine trees in accordance with the size of the village. Small villages generally had to cover at least about 1-1/2 acres of land area each and some big villages were allotted up to 4-5 acres each.

This routine forced labour duty to plant and look after pine trees had been imposed upon them over the many other already existing forced labour duties, including the physic nut plantations that required their year round attention, complained the villagers who had fled the place in June while the planting of pine trees was still underway.

VILLAGERS FORCED TO CULTIVATE SOYA BEAN FOR MILITARY ON THEIR CULTIVATED LAND, IN MURNG-NAI

Since June 2008, villagers in Naa Khaan village tract in **Murng-Nai** township have been forced by SPDC troops of IB248 to grow soya bean for the military on plots of land they previously used to grow their own crops.

In June 2008, SPDC troops of IB248 designated about 80 acres of land in Naa Khaan village tract in Murng-Nai township to be used to grow soya bean for the military. The designated land comprised several plots of land previously cultivated by local villagers.

The SPDC troops then ordered villagers in Naa Khaan village tract to grow soya bean on the land for the military. The villagers were also required to provide their own soya bean seeds, at the rate of at least 1/2 basket per village, and cultivate them from start to finish, until the produce reached the hands of the troops.

Many villagers, especially of Pa Laai, Nawng Leng and Maak Laang villages, whose plots of cultivated land had been taken away for the said purpose, also lost their means of livelihood because there was not enough time for them to find new

plots of land to grow their own crops, in addition to having to provide free labour for the military.

According to the villagers from Pa Laai, Nawng Leng and Maak Laang villages, who had fled to the Thai border, people in Naa Khaan village tract were still required to provide other routine unpaid forced labour for the military camps in their area, including fetching water, fixing fences and barrack buildings, clearing trenches and camp compounds of grass, etc..

VILLAGERS FORCED TO GROW CORN FOR THE MILITARY A SECOND TIME IN LARNG-KHUR

In June 2008, villagers of several villages in Wan Zid village tract, **Larng-Khur** township, were forced by SPDC troops of IB99 to grow corn a second time after the first crop, grown a month or so previously, failed because inadequate rain.

The villagers Nam Naw, Nam Terng and several other villages in Wan Zid village tract had already been forced to grow the said corn sometime in May using their own corn seeds. But for some reason, probably inadequate rain water, the seeds had not grown properly.

Then in June, the SPDC troops of IB99 brought a different strain of corn seeds, brought up from lower Burma, and again forced the villagers to grow them in place of the failed crop. This time, the troops warned the villagers to look after the crop carefully and make sure that they grow properly until the harvest time.

The villagers were required to work in rotation to tend the corn field regularly until the corn ears were ripe and ready for harvest. Those who failed to go to work in their turn were required to pay a fine of 3,500 kyat and up to 50,000 kyat, according to their social and economic status.

VILLAGERS FORCED TO CULTIVATE CORN FOR MILITARY IN NAM-ZARNG

For 4-5 months, starting from May 2008, villagers of Kun Saai village in Mai Hai village tract, **Nam-Zarng** township, were forced to cultivate corn for the military by the SPDC troops of LIB543 based in Nam-Zarng township.

The villagers were first forced to clear an area of unused land near their village to be used to grow corn for the military, but later some adjacent plots of villagers' cultivated land were also taken to include in the military corn field.

The corn field was nearly 200 acres in area and the villagers were required to grow corn with their own corn seeds in it, and were also responsible to look after the crop, doing all that was necessary to make the crop grow properly, until the produce was harvested and transported to the military base. During the sowing time, at least 30 villagers per day were required to sow the seeds for several days.

Apart from having to routinely grow crops for the military every year, villagers of Kun Saai village also had to provide other types of forced labour for the SPDC troops of LIB543 on a regular basis in maintaining their military camp, and the troops often shot and stole villagers' livestock such as chickens and pigs.

VILLAGERS FORCED TO GROW CORN, PEANUT AND SESAME FOR MILITARY IN MURNG-NAI

During mid 2008, villagers of Nam Waw Lur and Loi Len villages in Son Maak Yaang village tract, **Murng-Nai** township, were forced to grow corn, peanut and sesame for the military by the SPDC troops of IB248 based in Murng-Nai.

Sometime in late April and early May 2008, SPDC troops from IB248 came by a truck to Nam Waw Lur village. They brought with them seeds of corn, peanut and sesame, and ordered the villagers of Nam Waw Lur and Loi Len villages to grow them for the military.

The SPDC troops gave the seeds to the village headman of Nam Waw Lur - about 4 pyi of sesame seeds, 18 5-litre-tins of peanut seeds and 20 5-litre-tins of corn seeds - and instructed him to make the villagers of the 2 villages grow them for the military.

The troops said if the crops yielded good harvests, the villagers would be awarded or paid for their labour, and left the village. The headman then called a meeting and explained about it to the villagers of the 2 villages and allotted duties among them; they clearly understood that they had to do it whether they would be actually paid or awarded or not.

The villagers had to find and clear 3 plots of land for the 3 different kinds of crop and cultivated them as instructed by the SPDC troops. The villagers were still busy regularly tending the 3 crops in mid 2008 when this report was received.

PEOPLE FORCED TO GROW MORE PHYSIC NUT IN LAI-KHA AND KAE-SEE

In mid 2008, people in **Lai-Kha** and **Kae-See** townships were forced to grow more physic nut plants by SPDC troops of IB64 and IB286 while still required to look after those that had been planted during the previous years.

Sometime in April 2008, SPDC authorities of IB64 issued an order requiring people who lived along the main road leading from Lai-Kha to Murng Nawng village in Kae-See township, altogether more than 20 villages, to grow more physic nut in addition to those that had been grown in the previous years.

Each household in the area was required to grow 150 more physic nut plants at places designated by the SPDC troops who were also in charged of overseeing the cultivation of physic nut. Each household had to provide a day-labourer about 3 times per week, or pay a fine of 5,000 kyat each time for failing to do so.

At around the same time, SPDC troops of IB286, based at Murng Nawng in Kae-See township, also issued a similar order requiring villages along the section of the same main road in Kae-See township to grow more physic nut.